

# The Road to World War II

## Ralph Raico

World War One's direct costs to the United States were: 130,000 combat deaths; 35,000 men permanently disabled; \$33.5 billion (plus another \$13 billion in veterans' benefits and interest on the war debt, as of 1931, all in the dollars of those years); perhaps also some portion of the 500,000 influenza deaths among American civilians from the virus the men brought home from France. [\[1\]](#)

The indirect costs, in the battering of American freedoms and the erosion of attachment to libertarian values, were probably much greater. But as Colonel House had assured Wilson, no matter what sacrifices the war exacted, "the end will justify them" — the end of creating a world order of freedom, justice, and everlasting peace.

The process of meeting that rather formidable challenge began in Paris, in January 1919, where the leaders of "the Allied and Associated Powers" gathered to decide on the terms of peace and write the Covenant of the League of Nations. [\[2\]](#)

A major complication was the fact that Germany had not surrendered unconditionally, but under certain definite conditions respecting the nature of the final settlement. The State Department note of November 5, 1918 informed Germany that the United States and the Allied governments consented to the German proposal. The basis of the final treaties would be "the terms of peace laid down in the president's address to Congress of January 1918 [the Fourteen Points speech], and the principles of settlement enunciated in his subsequent addresses." [\[3\]](#)

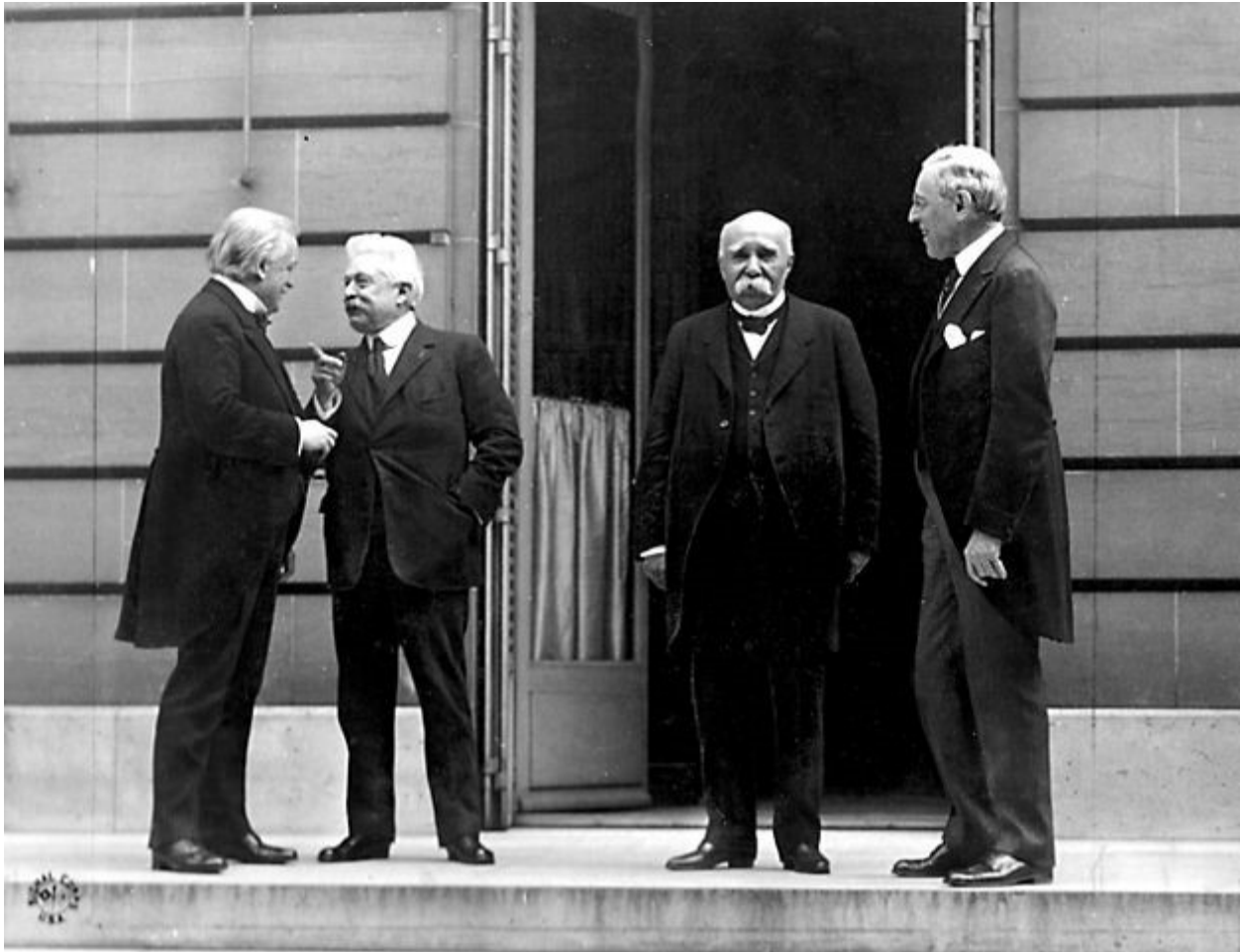
The essence of these pronouncements was that the peace treaties must be animated by a sense of justice and fairness to all nations. Vengeance and national greed would have no place in the new scheme of things. In his "Four Principles" speech one month after the Fourteen Points address, Wilson stated:

*"There shall be no contributions, no punitive damages. People are not to be handed about from one sovereignty to another by an international conference.... National aspirations must be respected; peoples may now be dominated and governed only by their own consent. "Self-determination" is not a mere phrase.... All the parties to this war must join in the settlement of every issue anywhere involved in it ... every territorial settlement involved in this war must be made in the interest and for the benefit of the populations concerned, and not as a part of any mere adjustment or compromise of claims amongst rival states...."* [\[4\]](#)

During the pre-armistice negotiations, Wilson insisted that the conditions of any armistice had to be such "as to make a renewal of hostilities on the part of Germany impossible." Accordingly, the Germans surrendered their battle fleet and submarines, some 1,700 airplanes, 5,000 artillery, 30,000 machine guns, and other materiel, while the Allies occupied the Rhineland and the Rhine bridgeheads. [\[5\]](#) Germany was now defenseless, dependent on Wilson and the Allies keeping their word.

Yet the hunger blockade continued, and was even expanded, as the Allies gained control of the German Baltic coast and banned even fishing boats. The point was reached where the commander of the British army of occupation demanded of London that food be sent to the famished Germans. His troops could no longer stand the sight of hungry German children rummaging in the rubbish bins of the British camps

for food. [6] Still, food was only allowed to enter Germany in March 1919, and the blockade of raw materials continued until the Germans signed the Treaty.



*Council of Four at the WWI Paris peace conference, May 27, 1919. (L - R) Prime Minister David Lloyd George (Great Britain) Premier Vittorio Orlando, Italy, French Premier Georges Clemenceau, President Woodrow Wilson.*

*By Edward N. Jackson (US Army Signal Corps) (U.S. Signal Corps photo) [Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons*

Early on in Paris, there were disquieting signs that the Allies were violating the terms of surrender. The German delegation was permitted to take no part in the deliberations. The Treaty, negotiated among the bickering victors — Wilson was so angry at one point that he temporarily withdrew — was drawn up and handed to the German delegates. Despite their outraged protests, they were finally forced to sign it, in a humiliating ceremony at the Palace of Versailles, under threat of the invasion of a now helpless Germany.

This wobbly start to the era of international reconciliation and eternal peace was made far worse by the provisions of the Treaty itself.

Germany was allowed an army of no more than 100,000 men, no planes, tanks, or submarines, while the whole left bank of the Rhine was permanently demilitarized. But this was a unilateral disarmament. No

provision was made for the general disarmament (point 4 of the Fourteen Points) of which this was supposed to be the first step and which, in fact, never occurred. There was no "free, open-minded and absolutely impartial adjustment of all colonial claims" (point 5). Instead, Germany was stripped of its colonies in Africa and the Pacific, which were parceled out among the winners of the war. In that age of high imperialism, colonies were greatly, if mistakenly, valued, as indicated by the brutality with which Britain and France as well as Germany repressed revolts by the native peoples. Thus, the transfer of the German colonies was another source of grievance. In place of a peace with "no contributions or punitive damages," the Treaty called for an unspecified amount in reparations. These were to cover the costs not only of damage to civilians but also of pensions and other military expenses. The sum eventually proposed was said to amount to more than the entire wealth of Germany, and the Germans were expected to keep on paying for many decades to come.<sup>[7]</sup>

Most bitterly resented, however, were the territorial changes in Europe.

Wilson had promised, and the Allies had agreed, that "self-determination" would serve as the cornerstone of the new world order of justice and peace. It was this prospect that had produced a surge of hope throughout the Western world as the Peace Conference began. Yet there was no agreement among the victors on the desirability of self-determination, or even its meaning. Georges Clemenceau, the French Premier, rejected it as applied to the Germans, and aimed to set up the Rhineland as a separate state. The British were embarrassed by the principle, since they had no intention of applying it to Cyprus, India, Egypt — or Ireland. Even Wilson's Secretary of State could not abide it; Lansing pointed out that both the United States and Canada had flagrantly violated the sanctity of self-determination, in regard to the Confederacy and Quebec, respectively.<sup>[8]</sup>

Wilson himself had little understanding of what his doctrine implied. As the conference progressed, the president, buffeted by the grimly determined Clemenceau and the clever British prime minister David Lloyd George, acquiesced in a series of contraventions of self-determination that in the end made a farce of his own lofty if ambiguous principle.

Wilson had declared that national groups must be given "the utmost satisfaction that can be accorded them without introducing new, or perpetuating old, elements of discord and antagonism." At Paris, Italy was given the Brenner Pass as its northern frontier, placing nearly a quarter of a million Austrian Germans in the South Tyrol under Italian control. The German city of Memel was given to Lithuania, and the creation of the Polish Corridor to the Baltic and of the "Free City" of Danzig (under Polish control) affected another 1.5 million Germans. The Saar region was handed over to France for at least 15 years. Altogether some 13.5 million Germans were separated from the Reich.<sup>[9]</sup> The worst cases of all were Austria and the Sudetenland.

In Austria, when the war ended, the Constituent Assembly that replaced the Habsburg monarchy voted unanimously for Anschluss, or union with Germany; in plebiscites, the provinces of Salzburg and the Tyrol voted the same way, by 98 percent and 95 percent, respectively. But Anschluss was forbidden by the terms of the Treaty (as was the use of "German-Austria" as the name of the new country).<sup>[10]</sup> The only grounds for this shameless violation of self-determination was that it would strengthen Germany — hardly what the victors had in mind.<sup>[11]</sup>

The Peace Conference established an entity called "Czechoslovakia," a state that in the interwar period enjoyed the reputation of a gallant little democracy in the dark heart of Europe. In reality, it was another

"prison-house of nations."[\[12\]](#) The Slovaks had been deceived into joining by promises of complete autonomy; even so, Czechs and Slovaks together represented only 65 percent of the population. In fact, the second largest national group was the Germans.[\[13\]](#)

Germans had inhabited the Sudetenland, a compact territory adjacent to Germany and Austria, since the Middle Ages. With the disintegration of Austria-Hungary they wished to join what remained of Austria, or even Germany itself. This was vehemently opposed by Thomas Masaryk and Eduard Beneš, leaders of the well-organized Czech contingent at the conference and liberal darlings of the Allies. Evidently, though the Czechs had the right to secede from Austria-Hungary, the Germans had no right to secede from Czechoslovakia. Instead, the incorporation of the Sudetenland was dictated by economic and strategic considerations — and historical ones, as well. It seems that the integrity of the lands of the Crown of St. Wenceslaus — Bohemia, Moravia, and Austrian Silesia — had to be preserved. No such concern, however, was shown at Paris for the integrity of the lands of the Crown of St. Stephen, the ancient Kingdom of Hungary.[\[14\]](#) Finally, Masaryk and Beneš assured their patrons that the Sudeten Germans yearned to join the new west Slavic state. As Alfred Cobban commented wryly, "To avoid doubt, however, their views were not ascertained."[\[15\]](#)

This is in no way surprising. The instrument of the plebiscite was employed when it could harm Germany. Thus, plebiscites were held to divide up areas that, if taken as a whole, might vote for union with Germany, e.g., Silesia. But the German request for a plebiscite in Alsace-Lorraine, which many French had left and many Germans entered after 1871, was turned down.[\[16\]](#)

In the new Czechoslovakia, Germans suffered government-sponsored discrimination in the ways typical of the statist order of Central Europe. They were disadvantaged in "land reform," economic policy, the civil service, and education. The civil liberties of minority groups, including the Slovaks, were violated by laws criminalizing peaceful propaganda against the tightly centralized structure of the new state. Charges by the Germans that their rights under the minority-treaty were being infringed brought no relief.[\[17\]](#)

The protests of Germans within the boundaries of the new Poland resembled those in Czechoslovakia, except that the former were subjected to frequent mob violence.[\[18\]](#) The Polish authorities, who looked on the German minority as potentially treasonous, proposed to eliminate it either through assimilation (unlikely) or coerced emigration. As one scholar has concluded, "Germans in Poland had ample justification for their complaints; their prospects for even medium-term survival were bleak."[\[19\]](#)

At the end of the Twentieth century, we are accustomed to viewing certain groups as eternally oppressed victims and other groups as eternal oppressors. But this ideological stratagem did not begin with the now pervasive demonization of the white race. There was an earlier mythology, which held that the Germans were always in the wrong vis-à-vis their Slavic neighbors. Heavily reinforced by Nazi atrocities, this legend is now deeply entrenched. The idea that at certain times Poles and Czechs victimized Germans cannot be mapped on our conceptual grid. Yet it was often the case in the interwar period.[\[20\]](#)

The German leaders, of course, had been anything but angels preceding and during the war. But, if a lasting peace was the purpose of the Versailles Treaty, it was a bad idea to plant time bombs in Europe's future. Of Germany's border with Poland, Lloyd George himself predicted that it "must in my judgment lead sooner or later to a new war in the east of Europe."[\[21\]](#) Wilson's pretense that all injustices would

be rectified in time — "It will be the business of the League to set such matters right" — was another of his complacent delusions. The League's Covenant stipulated unanimity in such questions and thus "rendered the League an instrument of the status quo."[\[22\]](#)

Vengeance continued to be the order of the day, as France invaded the Ruhr in 1923, supposedly because reparations payments were in arrears (Britain and Italy, equal partners in supervision of reparations, disagreed). The French also stepped up their futile efforts to establish a separatist state in the Rhineland. There, as in the Ruhr, they ostentatiously deployed native colonial troops, who delighted in the novelty of their superior status to Europeans. This was felt to be a further indignity by many Germans.[\[23\]](#)

The problems dragged on through the 1920s and early '30s. The territorial settlement was bitterly opposed by every political party in Germany, from the Far Left to the Far Right, through to the end of the Weimar Republic. In the past, treaties had often been gradually and peacefully revised through changes enacted by one party which the other parties declined to challenge.[\[24\]](#) Yet even with the Nazi threat looming over Weimar Germany, France refused to give an inch. In 1931, Chancellor Heinrich Brüning arranged for a customs union with Austria, which would have amounted to a great patriotic triumph for the fledgling democracy. It was vetoed by France. Vansittart, at the British Foreign Office, no lover of Germany, warned that "Brüning's Government is the best we can hope for; its disappearance would be followed by a Nazi avalanche."[\[25\]](#)

In the east, France's allies, Poland and Czechoslovakia, similarly refused any concessions. They had been obliged to sign agreements guaranteeing certain rights to their ethnic minorities. Protests to the League from the German minorities got nowhere: League mediators "almost always recommended accepting the promises of member governments to mend their ways.... Even when the League found fault with a policy that had led to a minority complaint, it was almost never able to get a member state to act accordingly." In any case, the Polish position was that "minority peoples needed no protection from their own government and that it was 'disloyal' for minority organizations to seek redress before the League."[\[26\]](#)

When Germany became a League member, evidence of terrorism against the German minority in Poland carried more weight. In 1931, the League Council unanimously accepted a report "essentially substantiating the charges against the Poles." But again no effective action was taken. The British delegates had "frankly adopted the view that where German minorities were concerned, it was for the German Government to look after their interests."[\[27\]](#) After 1933, a German government chose to do exactly that, in its own savage way.[\[28\]](#) Back in January 1917, Wilson had addressed Congress on the nature of the settlement, once the terrible war was over: it must be a peace without victory.... Victory would mean peace forced upon the loser, a victor's terms imposed upon the vanquished. It would be accepted in humiliation, under duress, at an intolerable sacrifice, and would leave a sting, a resentment, a bitter memory upon which terms of peace would rest, not permanently, but only as upon quicksand.[\[29\]](#)

A prescient warning indeed. Woodrow Wilson's own foolish, blatant disregard of it helped bring about a tragedy for Europe and the world that surpassed even the First World War.

## Notes:

This article is excerpted from Ralph Raico's *Great Wars & Great Leaders: A Libertarian Rebuttal* (Auburn, Ala.: Ludwig von Mises Institute, 2010).

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- [1] Otis L. Graham, Jr., *The Great Campaigns: Reform and War in America, 1900–1928* (Malabar, Fla.: Robert E. Krieger, 1987), p. 91. On the influenza epidemic, see T. Hunt Tooley, "Some Costs of the Great War: Nationalizing Private Life," *The Independent Review* (Fall, 2009), p. 166 n. 1 and the sources cited there. Tooley's essay is an original, thought-provoking treatment of some of the war's "hidden costs."
- [2] The following discussion draws on John Maynard Keynes, *The Economic Consequences of the Peace* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Howe, 1920); Alcide Ebray, *La paix malpropre: Versailles* (Milan: Unitas, 1924); Sally Marks, *The Illusion of Peace: International Relations in Europe, 1918–1933* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1976), pp. 1–25; Eugene Davidson, *The Making of Adolf Hitler: The Birth and Rise of Nazism* (Columbia, Mo.: University of Missouri Press, 1997 [1977]); Roy Denman, *Missed Chances: Britain and Europe in the Twentieth Century* (London: Cassell, 1996), pp. 29–49; and Alan Sharp, *The Versailles Settlement: Peacemaking in Paris, 1919* (New York: St. Martin's, 1991), among other works.
- [3] James Brown Scott, ed., *Official Statements of War Aims and Peace Proposals, December 1916 to November 1918* (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1921), p. 457. The two modifications proposed by the Allied governments and accepted by the United States and Germany concerned freedom of the seas and the compensation owed by Germany for the damage done to the civilian populations of the Allied nations. For earlier notes exchanged between Germany and the United States regarding the terms of surrender, see pp. 415, 419, 420–21, 430–31, 434–35, 455.
- [4] Arthur S. Link, ed., *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson, January 16-March 12, 1918* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1984), vol. 46, pp. 321–23. For the Fourteen Points speech of January 8, 1918, see *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson, November 11, 1917-January 15, 1918*, Arthur S. Link, ed. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1984), vol. 45, pp. 534–39.
- [5] Scott, *Official Statements*, p. 435; Davidson, *The Making of Adolf Hitler*, p. 112; and Denman, *Missed Chances*, p. 33.
- [6] Denman, *Missed Chances*, pp. 33–34; and C. Paul Vincent *The Politics of Hunger: The Allied Blockade of Germany, 1915–1919* (Ohio University Press, 1985), pp. 110 and 76–123. That the hunger blockade had a part in fueling later Nazi fanaticism seems undeniable. See Theodore Abel, *The Nazi Movement: Why Hitler Came to Power* (New York: Atherton, 1960 [1938]) and Peter Lowenberg, "The Psychohistorical Origins of the

Nazi Youth Cohorts," *American Historical Review*, vol. 76, no. 3 (December 1971), discussed in "Starving a People into Submission," a review of Vincent's book, in Ralph Raico, *Great Wars & Great Leaders: A Libertarian Rebuttal* (Auburn, Ala.: Ludwig von Mises Institute, 2010), p. 197.

- [7] Charles Callan Tansill, "The United States and the Road to War in Europe," in Harry Elmer Barnes, ed., *Perpetual War for Perpetual Peace* (Caldwell, Id.: Caxton, 1953), pp. 83–88; Denman, *Missed Chances*, pp. 32, 57–59; Davidson, *The Making of Adolf Hitler*, p. 155.
- [8] Alfred Cobban, *The Nation State and National Self-Determination* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1970), pp. 61–62. On the scorn with which the Anglophile Wilson treated the request of the Irish for independence, see p. 66.
- [9] R. W. Seton-Watson, *Britain and the Dictators: A Survey of Post-War British Policy* (New York: Macmillan, 1938), p. 324.
- [10] Davidson, *The Making of Adolf Hitler*, pp. 115–16. Even Charles Homer Haskins, head of the western Europe division of the American delegation, considered the prohibition of the Austrian-German union an injustice; see Charles Homer Haskins and Robert Howard Lord, *Some Problems of the Peace Conference* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1920), pp. 226–28.
- [11] The story of Reinhard Spitzky, *So Haben Wir das Reich Verspielt: Bekenntnisse eines Illegalen* (Munich: Langen Müller, 1986) is instructive in this regard. As a young Austrian, Spitzky was incensed at the treatment of his own country and of Germans in general at the Paris Conference and afterwards. The killing of 54 Sudeten German protestors by Czech police on March 4, 1919 particularly appalled Spitzky. He joined the Austrian Nazi Party and the SS. Later, Spitzky, who had never favored German expansionism, became a caustic critic of Ribbentrop and a member of the anti-Hitler resistance.
- [12] On the Czech question at the Peace Conference and the First Czechoslovak Republic, see Kurt Glaser, *Czechoslovakia: A Critical History* (Caldwell, Id.: Caxton, 1962), pp. 13–47.
- [13] This is the breakdown of the population, according the census of 1926: Czechs 6.5 million; Germans 3.3 million; Slovaks 2.5 million; Hungarians 800 thousand; Ruthenians 400 thousand; Poles 100 thousand. John Scott Keltie, ed., *The Statesman's Yearbook, 1926* (London: Macmillan, 1926), p. 768; and Glaser, *Czechoslovakia*, p. 6.
- [14] The Germans were by no means the only people whose "right to self-determination" was manifestly infringed. Millions of Ukrainians and White Russians were included in the new Poland. As for the Hungarians, the attitude that prevailed towards them in Paris is epitomized by the statement of Harold Nicholson, one of the British negotiators: "I confess that I regarded, and still regard, that Turanian tribe with acute

distaste. Like their cousins the Turks, they had destroyed much and created nothing." The new borders of Hungary were drawn in such a way that one-third of the Magyars were assigned to neighboring states. See Stephen Borsody, "State- and Nation-Building in Central Europe: The Origins of the Hungarian Problem," in idem, ed., *The Hungarians: A Divided Nation* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale Center for International and Area Studies, 1988), pp. 3–31 and especially in the same volume Zsuzsa L. Nagy, "Peacemaking after World War I: The Western Democracies and the Hungarian Question," pp. 32–52. Among the states that inherited territories from Germany and Austria-Hungary, the minority components were as follows: Czechoslovakia: (not counting Slovaks) 34.7 percent; Poland 30.4 percent; Romania 25 percent; Yugoslavia (not counting Croats and Slovenes) 17.2 percent. Seton-Watson, *Britain and the Dictators*, pp. 322–23.

- [15] Cobban, *The Nation State*, p. 68. C. A. Macartney, *National States and National Minorities* (New York: Russell and Russell, 1968 [1934]), pp. 413–15, noted that by official decree Czech was the language of state, to be used exclusively in all major departments of government and as a rule with the general public. This led to German complaints that the aim was "to get the whole administration of the country, as far as possible, into Czechoslovak hands." Macartney maintained, nonetheless, that the Sudeten Germans were "not, fundamentally, irredentist." Of course, as Cobban observed, they had not been asked.
- [16] Cobban, *The Nation State*, p. 72. Even Marks, *The Illusion of Peace*, p. 11, who was generally supportive of the Versailles Treaty, stated that Alsace-Lorraine was returned to France "to the considerable displeasure of many of its inhabitants."
- [17] Glaser, *Czechoslovakia*, pp. 13–33.
- [18] Unlike the Sudeten Germans, however, who mainly lived in a great compact area adjacent to Germany and Austria, most of the Germans in Poland (but not Danzig) could only have been united with their mother country by bringing in many non-Germans as well. But even some areas with a clear German majority that were contiguous to Germany were awarded to Poland. In Upper Silesia, the industrial centers of Kattowitz and Königshütte, which voted in plebiscites for Germany by majorities of 65 percent and 75 percent respectively, were given to Poland. Richard Blanke, *Orphans of Versailles: The Germans in Western Poland 1918–1939* (Lexington, Ky.: 1993), pp. 21, 29.
- [19] Ibid., pp. 236–37. See also Tansill, "The United States and the Road to War in Europe," pp. 88–93.
- [20] In 1919, Ludwig von Mises wrote: "The unfortunate outcome of the war [i.e., increased statism and injustice] brings hundreds of thousands, even millions, of Germans under foreign rule and imposes tribute payments of unheard-of size on the rest of Germany." Mises, *Nation, State, and Economy*, (Indianapolis, Ind., Liberty Fund, 2006) p. 217. Still,



Mises admonished the Germans to eschew the path of imperialism and follow economic liberalism instead. See also the comment of Hew Strachan, *The First World War, vol. 1, To Arms* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 2: "the injustices done to Germans residing in the successor states of the Austro-Hungarian empire came to be widely recognized."

- [21] "By the early spring of 1922, Lloyd George came to the conclusion that the Treaty of Versailles had been an awful mistake and that it was in no small way responsible for the economic crisis in which both Great Britain and the Continental European nations now found themselves." Richard M. Watt, *The Kings Depart: The Tragedy of Versailles and the German Revolution* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1968), p. 513.
- [22] Denman, *Missed Chances*, pp. 42, 45; Marks, *The Illusion of Peace*, p. 14.
- [23] Tansill, "The United States and the Road to War in Europe," pp. 94–95; Denman, *Missed Chances*, pp. 51–52.
- [24] Ebray, *La paix malpropre*, pp. 341–43.
- [25] Denman, *Missed Chances*, p. 53.
- [26] Blanke, *Orphans of Versailles*, pp. 132, 136–37.
- [27] Davidson, *The Making of Adolf Hitler* (the best work on the role of the Versailles Treaty in assisting the rise of Nazism), p. 289; and Cobban, *The Nation State*, p. 89.
- [28] The idea that an Anglo-American guarantee to France against German "aggression" would have availed to freeze the constellation of forces as of 1919 *ad infinitum* was a fantasy. Already in 1922, Weimar Germany reached a rapprochement with Soviet Russia, at Rapallo.
- [29] Arthur S. Link, ed., *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson, November 20, 1916-January 23, 1917* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1982), vol. 40, p. 536.

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